# Negroes or Colored People? » » »

● By KELLY MILLER

**Everyone who is called upon to speak of the Negro in America will appreciate this discussion by Kelly Miller of a question that is constantly asked by both white and colored people.**

THERE is much concern among our off-colored folks as to by what name they shall call themselves or be called by their white fellow citizens. Such terms as Blacks, Africans, Darkies, Freedmen, Afro-Americans, Racemen, Negroes, and Colored People have been in vogue at different stages of their history. Some would wish to abolish all nominal distinction and let the individual be known as an American, regardless of his race or color. The banishment of all nominal distinction is purely idealistic, and will be impossible unless or until all distinction and discrimination, based upon race or color, are completely obliterated. Under the spell of the Declaration of Independence the founders of the Constitution sought to ignore all lines of race and color in the structure of the organic law of the land. By cunning subvention the phrase "other persons" was devised as a subterfuge to avoid direct mention, but by a strange inconsistency they did not hesitate to exclude "Indians not taxed" from the basis of representation.

Whenever two distinguishable groups are thrown into close juxtaposition and association, there is always imperative necessity of some mark by which the individual is tied to his classification. Sex distinction constitutes the deepest division of the human race. The individuals of the two sexes are separated by dress, as well as by name, so as to relieve the embarrassment of mistaken identity across the sex line. A mistaken identity of race in Mississippi or Alabama might cause as much embarrassment as a similar mistake in sex. The genius of language has devised appropriate nomenclatures so that the very name itself connotes the sex to which the individual belongs. We can look in the city directory and tell the sex classification by the name of the individual. Thus James, Henry, John, etc. designate the male sex while Mary, Martha, Elizabeth, Eve, Jane, etc. represent the female members of the species. The sexes are still further distinguished by the titles of Mr. and Mrs. Furthermore, the difference between married and single women is of such sociological significance that the title of Mrs. and Miss determines the marital status of the individual female. There is no such deep importance existing between married and single men, so that the term Mr. applies indifferently to either. Wherever significant group distinction exists whether based on race, religion, or culture, such terms as Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian, Christian and heathen, have been universally applied for the purpose of identification.

In the modern world, and most especially in the United States, "white" and "colored" are the distinguishing and differentiating terms most widely in use. They indicate the deepest division, apart from sex, now recognized among human groups. If a street car or automobile should maim or kill an individual in any of our cities, the first query that springs to the lips is not whether the victim be Jew or Gentile, Christian or heathen, native or alien, but is he white or colored? Sentiment is adjusted according to the answer to this query. If any American citizen applies to a court for a marriage license, to a church for membership, to a school for admission, to a labor union for an entrance card, to a hotel for accommodation, or to an employer for work, his racial identity must be ascertained before the appropriate treatment can be accorded. In every day procedure one's racial cognomen, expressed or inferred, is as essential as his surname.

The so-called white race is composed of a group of individuals of a whitish color, ranging from blonde to brunette. On the chromatic scale, there are two extreme colors—white and black. All between these extremes are colored, which would comprise practically the whole human race, scientifically speaking, according to the spectrum sense of these terms. For practical purposes, a white person may be defined as one of un-mixed, European blood or descent. In the broadest sense, the term "colored" includes all non-Europeans, without regard to nationality or degree of inter-mixture of blood. Colloquially speaking, in the United States, the terms "Negro" and "Colored" are used synonymically, and denote a non-white person of African descent, without reference to blood composition.

Slaves were at first designated as blacks, at a time when all blacks were slaves, and all slaves were of that color; but when some slaves became free, and others underwent a change of color through cross-breeding, the two terms could no longer be used indiscriminately. The term "Black" was then used in a generic sense, as when Toussaint L'Ouverture addressed a communication to Napoleon Bonaparte as com-



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ing from the first of the blacks to the first of the whites.

The word African was accepted by the race in the early years, after it first came to self-consciousness. This we see from the survival of such terms as the "African Methodist Episcopal Church" and the "African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church." These were the first organizations formed of Negroes, for Negroes and by Negroes. The term "Darky" was often used as a becoming racial designation. This we see in such songs as "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia" and "Way Down Upon the Swanee River." The term "darky" was evidently applied to the race because of its darkish color. Thus Rudyard Kipling speaks of the Hindu "Brown Mammies" as "our dark foster mothers." At first it carried with it no invidious implication, and was used in the same descriptive sense as that in which we now refer to the darker races. As the race became self-conscious, it became sensitive and resented any designation which served to thrust it apart from their fellow men of lighter hue.

Just after the Civil War, the word Freedman came into general vogue. We see this in the survival of such terms as the Freedmen's Hospital, the Freedmen's Bureau and the Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The term Afro-American was invented by the late T. Thomas Fortune, Editor of the *New York Age,* about the year 1880. Mr. Fortune repudiated the word "Negro" because of the historical degradation and humiliation attached to it, and invented Afro-American as a more acceptable and honorific substitute. As a matter of fact, however, the original form of the word, and from an etymological sense, the more regular form was Afrıco-American. *The Afrıco-American Presbyterian,* the organ of the Negro Presbyterian Church, was published in 1879 at Biddle University, Charlotte, N. C., and is now in the midst of its 58th volume. Robert L. Abbot, Editor of the *Chicago Defender,* has recently suggested the term "Racemen" as a suitable designation for the racial group under consideration, and has banned the word Negro from the columns of his paper. Either the Indian or the white man has a better right to the exclusive appropriation of this term, which will doubtless fall under the weight of its own ineptness. It does not seem likely that either the *Afro-American,* the *Afrıco-American Presbyterian* or the *Chicago Defender* will acquire such generalistic authority as to impress these designations upon the acceptability of the group, or to give them wide currency and vogue.

*The Afro-American* has hit upon the experiment of affixing the term "white" or "colored" after each individual under discussion. Thus this paper would refer to Congressman Arthur W. Mitchell, however frequently mentioned, as colored, and to Senator William E. Borah or Secretary Hull as white. The difficulty of this procedure is its bad economy. The descriptive terms "white" and "colored" would have to be used with intolerable frequency and tireless repetion where the race of the individual is easily known or inferred. There is no use to describe each of the 434 members of Congress as white merely to offset the description of Arthur W. Mitchell as colored. In most relations, the race and color of the individual are known by the context, and do not need a specific designation.

White people of the South used to be in the habit of describing the color of their correspondent as a part of the envelope address, a pure waste of time and ink. The directory of the city of Denver, several years ago, and maybe for the present, for all I know, placed the word "colored" after each resident usually so known.

We have before us the terms, Blacks, Africans, Darkies, Freedman, Afro-Americans, Racemen, Negroes and Colored People from which to make selection and choice. We need pay very little attention to the terms African, Freedman or Darky. They have already fallen into disuse and will hardly be revived. The terms Afro-American and Afrıco-American are too cumbersome and unhandy, nor do they denote, with any degree of accuracy, the group to be described. The term "black" will still continue to be used, although it no longer describes every individual of the group. I have occasionally seen white blackbirds which did not derive their color name from their own feather, but from that of the flock to which they belonged. Afro-American indifferently indicates Negroes, whites, Arabs and Jews or their descendants born in Africa and living in America. Indeed it is interesting to note that neither the *Afrıco-American Presbyterian* nor the *Afro-American,* which stress their names in heavy type at the head of their papers, rarely ever use such terms in their news service or editorial columns.

After excluding from general usage these other appellations, which will be resorted to only occasionally to avoid too frequent repetition, "Negro" and "Colored People" will constitute the name by which the group will be universally known and designated. Let us now discuss the relative merits and drawbacks of "Negro" and "Colored People." It is clearly seen that the term "colored" is too broad and comprehensive as a suitable racial designation for the non-white American group of African descent. According to the Census Office, the term "colored" applies to all non-white elements in our complex racial population, including the Negro. In one column

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we have the off-colored populaton, including Negroes, Indians, Japanese, Chinese, Mongolians, Mexicans and all non-white varieties under the common designation of "colored," and in a parallel column the Negro, including all non-whites of African descent, without regard to inter-mixture of blood. This designation is not based on color, but on African descent.

The Census broke down the colored population into its several constituent racial elements on the advice of Dr. Charles E. Hall, himself a Negro, specialist in Negro statistics. This he found to be necesary in order that his data might have sociological meaning and importance. It would be utterly meaningless to ascertain the number of colored farmers in California or the number of colored land owners in Oklahoma if Japanese, Chinese and Indians are to be placed in the same category.

In several of the states, colored people of Negro, Indian, Mongolian and Mexican varieties have different legal status among themselves as respects inter-marriage, attendance upon the public schools and traveling in common carriers. Separate cars and waiting rooms provided for the races in the South are usually marked "For White" and "For Colored," but in the states of Texas and Oklahoma these separate facilities are designated "For Whites" and "For Negroes," the reason being that in Texas, especially the Southern portion of the state, there is a great number of Mexicans and in Oklahoma a large number of Indians, who are legally classified with the whites. I have ridden in the rear section of a street car in El Paso, Texas, set aside for Negroes. The front section, reserved for whites, was occupied, in the main, by Mexicans whose average color was darker than that of the rear seat occupants.

Prior to 1890 the Census Office sought to subdivide the Negro group into blacks, mulattoes, quadroons and octoroons. Subsequent to that date it found it impossible to make such sharp discriminations, since these divisions ran imperceptibly one into the other, and also since there was no definite discriminant or criterion by which the one could be separated from the other.

Upon the advice of the late Dr. Booker T. Washington, the Census Office adopted the term Negro. The Federal government, however, is not consistent in its designation of the racial group. The Army recruits certain regiments with "U. S. Colored troops." The government also maintains colored schools for the District of Columbia. The only objection to the word Negro is because of its presumed etymology. It comes from the Latin, through the Spanish, and means black. All so-called Negroes are not black. Neither are all so-called white folks white; nor yellow folks yellow; nor red folks red; nor brown folks brown. The term has generic, rather than specific meaning. It might be presumed that albicant Negroes who are near the border line would chiefly resent the term Negro because of its remote color connotation, but as a matter of fact and experience such persons are less apt to take umbrage at this appellation than some whose degree of admixture is much more apparent.

Mr. Arthur Garfield Hayes, the militant attorney for radical causes, has recently threatened to secure from the Supreme Court a legal definition of the term "Negro" or "colored person." There are 29 states in which legal distinction exists on account of race, such as separate cars, separate schools, and bans on inter-racial marriage. It would be seen, therefore, how important it is that there should be a Federal definition of "race" if laws are to be based upon such distinction. Hitler will soon be confronted with the necessity of a legal definition of Aryan and Jew, since he has placed the latter under political and civil disabilities.

The Southern states have adopted a workable definition of a "Negro" or "colored person" which roughly answers all of their practical purposes. The usual definition of a "Negro or "colored person" is based upon the proportion of Negro and white blood, but since no scientific blood tester has been discovered, these states have had to fall back upon observation and common judgment.

Frederick Douglass used to say that genealogical trees did not flourish among slaves. Birth certificates and marriage records, if any existed, recorded no certified proportion of white and Negro blood, either in parents or offspring. For example, there probably could not be isolated a single octoroon in the United States whose blood composition could be judicially or scientifically determined so as to meet the test of the dictionary definition. Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass were said to be mulattoes, but the conclusion rests wholly upon eyesight judgment and hearsay testimony.

Of the 29 states which have enacted laws based on race distinction, no one of them has an ultimate or adequate definition of "race." Individuals of the two races are forbidden to inter-marry upon superficial evidence, satisfactory to the clerk of the court. Children are assigned to white or colored schools wholly on superficial appearance. Every train and street car conductor in the South is set up as judge of the abstruse science of anthropology and ethnology. The state of Virginia has recently passed the most rigid of all laws based on race distinction. A "Negro" or "colored person" is defined

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by the statutes of the state as one in whom there is any traceable degree of non-white blood. How to trace this infinitesimal taint is a baffling mystery.

The nearest approach we have to a Federal definition of "Negro" or "colored person" was set up by the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, where white and colored schools operate under the laws of Congress. The judge decided that a "colored person" is one who, by contact and association, abides in the racial status. After all has been said and done, as good a definition of "Negro" as has ever been devised, is "a person who would be jim-crowed in Virginia." When this question reaches the Supreme Court, if it ever does, it is easy to predict this learned tribunal will side-step a technical and ultimate definition, and will fall back upon the resourcefulness of observation and common sense. This august tribunal has passed on laws excluding Japanese, Chinese and Filipinos from becoming citizens by naturalization. In no instance did it set up a definition of what constitutes a Japanese, or a Chinese, or a Filipino, but took the definition for granted. Should the Supreme Court undertake a technical definition of "race," it must first define a white man, and the exact point where, on account of inter-mixture of blood, the white man ends and the colored man begins. This would require more wisdom than the "nine wise old men" possess. The Supreme Court will, in all likelihood, fall back upon the existing definition, based upon appearance and hearsay, as long as it is workable.

Let us now discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of the words "Negro" and "colored" as appropriate designations of our off-colored group of African descent. There are certain connections in which the term "colored" could not be used effectively. Usually where deep-seated, philosophical meaning is involved, "Negro" is a much stronger term of the two. Try, if you will, to express the idea involved in Negro art, Negro music, Negro poetry, Negro genius, the *Journal of Negro History,* the *Journal of Negro Education* and the *Negro Yearbook* in terms of the word "colored" and see what a lamentable weakness would result from this substitution. On the other hand, such terms as "colored lady," "colored gentleman" and "colored society" sound more polite than the corresponding Negro equivalents. However, the preference, perhaps grows out of that to which the ear is accustomed.

The term "Negro" is far superior to the term "colored" in grammatical inflection, for it may be used either as a noun or as an adjective; whereas the term "colored" has no nominal equivalent. Unlike the word "black" or "white" it does not pluralize into a noun. We may say "blacks" or "whites" but have no corresponding equivalent in terms of "colored." The word, people, race or persons must be added to give this word collective or plural effect. Thus the National Association For The Advancement Of Colored People is certainly a long title for an organization, but could hardly be shortened because the word "people" must be added to "colored" to give it the effect of a noun. This handicap is seen also in the possessive case.

Many of the off-colored group object to the term "Negro" because it serves as a reminder of the humiliation and degredation through which the race has passed. The fact that "Negro" is now used to describe the group does not indicate any lesser degree of appreciation or esteem. It cannot be said that those who are most sensitive in taking umbrage at the use of the word "Negro" are motivated by any hope or expectation of escape from the status which it may connote. The loudest protestants are not generally those who are closest to the edge of the shadow line. Some feel that by adopting a different designation the race would be redeemed from the reproach which has so long been attached to the use of the term "Negro."

Any race, or group, in the long run, will derive its reputation from its character and worth, and not from the appellation by which it is known. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." To call a dog-fennel a goldenrod would not improve its odor. How would it benefit the Hottentot or the Eskimo to give them a different name? Indeed, we have two widely different groups which through geographical misapprehension, are designated by the same name, sometimes differentiated as the East Indian and the West Indian. Though known by the same name, they are as widely different in character and qualities as racial varieties can well be. The name has no relation to the character or reputation of either group.

If "Negroes" or "Colored People," if you please, wish to have the historical reproach attached to the group, rolled away, they must improve its status and quality which, of itself, would ennoble any designation. On the other hand, no name, however sonorous, can ennoble a race of sots, or slaves, or cowards.

Sensitiveness about a name is always a sign of the inferiority complex. The Greeks, now so-called, never knew themselves by that designation. All of the nobility attached to the name grows out of the character of the people to whom subsequent generations apply it. The white race does not care what you call them. The eagle suffers little birds to sing and is not careful what they mean thereby, but the in-

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ferior breeds are very sensitive unless they are designated by a sonorous and dignified title.

The word "Negro" possesses great grammatical advantage in that by inflection it also expresses the female sex. Princess, poetess and Jewess have their just grammatical analogue in Negress. The colored race has no more cause to take umbrage at this feminine derivative than the Jew, except insofar as it imputes derogatory implications to the mind and meaning of the user.

Again, the word "Negro" may be easily inflected into Negroid by adding the Greek ending "oid" which implies likeness or resemblance to. This term may be used either as a noun or an adjective, and forms an apt designation of the derivatives of African blood now scattered throughout the world.

On the other hand, the word "Negro" is easily inflected into "Nigger," which term the race justly resents as an offensive and insulting epithet. The public schools of the city of Washington recently placed under the ban OPPORTUNITY and *The Crisis,* the two leading Negro magazines, because they indulge the use of the term "Nigger" though merely in a pictorial or artistic sense.

Let the Negro ennoble his race by living an upright life and performing noble deeds. Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Joe Louis and Jesse Owens serve to enhance the reputation of their race, not by alteration in designation, but by worthwhile achievements.

The issue has recently arisen as to whether or not the word "Negro" should be capitalized. When the race had the status of a chattel it was perfectly normal to expect it would be designated with a small letter, along with horses, cattle and other items of material possessions, but when the race was clothed with the dignity and privilege of American citizenship, it claims the typographical recognition accorded to all other race varieties of our complex population. A printed list consisting of Englishmen, Germans, Italians, Jews and "negroes" would evidently be a case of unexplained typographical discrimination. If it be said that "Negro" is not derived from a country or geographical division as other racial designations are, an adequate rejoinder would be that neither is Jew; but no one would think of writing Jew with a small letter in the list of names where all other racial varieties are capitalized.

Through insistence of the late Booker T. Washington and other colored leaders and organizations many of our leading newspapers, magazines and publishing houses have been persuaded to spell "Negro" with a capital "N". Mr. Robert A. Pelham and Mr. Chares E. Hall, specialists in Negro statistics in the Census Office, persuaded that Bureau to capitalize the term wherever used in any of its publications. The Guide Manual of the U. S. Government Printing Office, revised March 1933, calls for capitalization of the term. In the future the non-white Americans of African descent, without regard to blood composition, will willingly be known as "Negroes" spelled with a capital "N".

Language is determined by the people who speak and write it most influentially. The leading newspapers, magazines, text books and literature in general use the word "Negroes" when applied to a well known and well understood group. Practically every colored writer and speaker of note and distinction freely uses the term "Negro." Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, Walter White, James Weldon Johnson, Prof. Benjamin G. Brawley and Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune fall in this category. There is no corresponding number of writers and speakers of like renown who deliberately repudiate its use. As long as this is the case, the ineffectual advocates of a satisfactory substitute for the word "Negro" will have to wait until they gain the ascendancy in our written and spoken language.

## *Hills of Reflection*

By THERESA CAVER

*I STOOD on a hill apart from living,*
*Yet where life, condensed, flowed through my heart,*
*Till a swift desire for not returning*
*Sent me, frightened, down to take my part.*

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